

## The 4<sup>th</sup> “R” of education--Resilience

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How does your child cope and work with upsetting events? No matter what the age, we all have to deal with events that push us off center—whether those events are about relationships, school, work or global happenings. Currently, in 2008, our children experience more layers of potential stressors than any other generation. Demands for academic achievement have accelerated; global and societal concerns are now in our backyard. Essentially, stress factors for all of us, but especially our children, have increased tremendously in the last decade.

How can we ‘immunize’ our children in order to help them best manage the upsets, the downturns, the unexpected? Doesn’t it seem essential to include resiliency on the list of competencies we want our children to develop? The primary question becomes, ***“How can we actually teach our children skills and strategies as tools to cope more effectively increase their resiliency to challenging events that will occur in their lives?”***

Coping skills, or coping styles, are probably combinations of personality and learned behavior. Martin Seligman, author of *The Optimistic Child*, has worked extensively in developing coping strategies for children at risk for depression. Interestingly, his strategies are simply effective coping skills for anyone—child or adult.

Seligman describes his approach, which serves to create resilience, as a means for developing optimism in children. Fundamentally he promotes strategies to incorporate a necessary objectivity in order to problem-solve the little and big crises that occur. For instance, the first step outlined discusses “thought catching”. “Thought catching” is stopping to notice the first thought or statement the little voice in our minds says to us when something negative happens. That first thought determines the next series of actions or thoughts that occur which, in turn, determine the outcome. Are those next thoughts and actions helpful and productive to a child? Do they serve to move the child forward in coping effectively, or do they perpetuate a sense of being overwhelmed without knowing what to do?

A simple example. A few years ago, I began hearing about a middle school student who had begun to suddenly and rapidly fall behind with homework. By the time I spoke with her, she was planning on leaving school (to be home-schooled) and was so overwhelmed she could not help but cry every time I tried to speak with her. Her first thoughts when realizing her situation were “I am stupid”, “I won’t ever be able to be a student in a real school” and so on. Those first thoughts mired her into a place of not being able to see any next steps toward a solution—only trying to find a step that would provide relief. We worked together by first stating realistically, yes, she was behind in all of her classes. However, it was work she was able to do. We just had to figure out a way to break the whole amount into manageable parts. What also came to light was the very important fact that this type of response was her automatic coping style. She would get behind, feel overwhelmed, panic and try to avoid rather than resolve the problem. I didn’t pretend she was in an easy situation. But once the plan was in place and she was getting out of the hole she was in, we talked about the pattern. I enthusiastically told her how great it was she was learning about all of this now and not years later. The following fall she came up to me and proudly told me she started the year thinking about her “pattern” and that she had managed to break it by utilizing the strategies she had learned. Her confidence was palpable.

Effective coping skills help create resiliency in children and are the very foundation on which our children’s development, both academically and socially, rests. It is our responsibility to consciously teach our children skills to effectively respond to and cope with the many experiences that will inevitably occur which may potentially ‘trip them up’. The 4<sup>th</sup> R of ‘academics’, resiliency, is as much a priority as reading and writing to ensure future success and living the best possible life.